

# **Shifting the Paradigms of Education and Language Policy: Implications for Language Minority Children**

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## **Language as a Negotiating Code for Decentering Power and Privilege**

The notion that language is used for communication is an understatement. Certainly, the axiom of language use is that it is preeminently for communication, but what is important to listen to in language use is the how, what, when, where,

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why, and especially the **who** as communicated to whom. The use of language quickly invokes imagery of dominance, politics, and the continual struggle between those in power and the marginalized. The hegemony of language is built into the cultural political patterns of any given society and used in ways that establish power and privilege among the legal, political, and socioeconomic structures. In frequent situations, for example, language is used to control the political will of the general public through its semantical methods employed to sell or enforce an ideology. Noam Chomsky (1984) called it the "manufacture of consent." It is the uncontested manufacture of consent that establishes the political order to a given society. What becomes meaningful to the rulers also becomes meaningful to the disenfranchised. Language is always located within dominant or marginal cultural boundaries (Giroux, 1988). From the terrain in which language originates, it takes its shape and form, either dominant or marginal. Language use is not innocent. It has the potential to empower and liberate or to oppress and suppress the voices of its subjects and objects. The marginalized must struggle against a tyranny of debased power to reconstruct broader domains of democratic shared power.

The language that I propose to use is one in which conviction is viewed as a catalyst for decentering the power and privilege that dominant groups have been unwilling to share. Marginalized and oppressed peoples have had much to say even though their voices haven't been heard and have had little to do about their providence in life, yet, it is this particular polemic within their subjugated location that is of vital importance to the promise of their emancipation. Without resistance to those in power, the language of freedom can never be hoped for, much less struggled for.

The authors of this special volume focus their work on the implications of language and educational policies that have the potential to empower all children with the desire to know themselves and be themselves. They address the belief that all children have the right to love, honor, and respect themselves through their cultural and linguistic heritages. These authors know that as children are exposed to new languages and cultures, their ability to understand and acquire them will be from the base of their own heritage. The authors of this volume also strongly suggest that educational, judicial, and public institutions must involve the public in rewriting policy in ways which compel and allow ethnolinguistic and racially non-Anglo children to view their diversity as enriching rather than deficient. Most of the authors in this special issue themselves come from a working class, gender hegemony, racial, and ethnic language minority background. Most of them know firsthand what the implicit and explicit struggles are of attending schools which fail to value their differences.

It is through their research and writing that they offer deeply insightful solutions and ideas for improving the education of language minority children and thus all children here in the United States and elsewhere. They have survived the Eurocentric curricula and the sociocentric instruction that have unremittingly prevailed in American schools for almost a century. The themes, issues, and topics included in this special issue of *The Journal* are attempts to rewrite the stories of the social, economic, political, and educational experiences of language minority students that for too long have been eliminated, avoided, or both, in educational settings. The disabling languages and practices traditionally used (isolation, negligence, segregation, discrimination) for coping with language minority children are no longer acceptable given the rich research and resources illuminated in journals, texts, and other sources.

In recent years, the policies of schools influenced and sponsored by conservative educational agendas have all too often been cognitively undemanding but symbolically representative of strict memory socialization processes designed to prepare obedient workers not creative thinkers. More obvious is their design not to generate cognizant democratic citizens capable of constructing their own social, economic, political and educational realities. And, inasmuch as schools were intended to provide greater opportunities for all pupils who gallivanted through them, the real picture dictates that, in fact, schools failed miserably at dispensing equitable amounts of knowledge and information to empower all students (Katz, 1975). The mainstream education discourses regarding schooling and their facility to prevent crime and poverty and to develop new social structures kept many marginalized groups baffled. On the one hand, many of the efforts of peripherally located groups in American society tried to improve their location and condition in society by means of middle class prescribed schooling recipes; however, those efforts were only partially or never fulfilled. On the other hand, the privileged doctrines have always been positioned in a language which only appears to fulfill the dream. And as many of us have come to understand, the dream is quite elusive, especially for the underrepresented.

The lack of an employed language of human agency ensures inequality of access for the powerless. Giroux (1988) suggests that pedagogical practices must reflect the everyday life experiences of the students involved in learning activities. Language must become problematic for it to critically engage the relationship between subject and object, student and teacher. If language is not critical, then it cannot be engaging; rather it remains subjective and narrowly definitive. The language of teachers must be one of understanding and commitment for language minority students. Teachers must deinstrumentalize their approaches to teaching and learning so as to prevent their own deskilling

and disabling. They must learn to contextualize their knowledges and facilitate classrooms according to the needs of students rather than to the constrictive and overly prescriptive regulations of state agencies. The practices of teachers must be informed by new theories of unrestricted human development, inclusion, multiple voices, relationships, and everyone's everyday life. Teachers must expand the content of knowledge to include the real-life projects of the diverse students they are preparing for the future. Learning must be historical in order to prevent the ruthlessness of a future that negates and strips cultural and linguistic identities and unimagined possibilities. And teachers must create the culturally democratic environments necessary for twenty-first century educational settings that need new questions, new social analysis, and new critical discourses. These languages must be comprised of post-discourses such as post-modernism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism, post-industrialism, including feminism and others. Language must be exercised to rethink and rewrite the issues of schooling, education, and pedagogy and not merely to reproduce them. And the issues and questions of educational and language policies must reflect the images of the pluralistic populations of a given society. In the following section, I will briefly focus on the educational and language policy issues of language minority populations here in the United States.

### **Education and Language Policy**

Our challenge as educators of language minority students is to rescue bilingual education and multicultural education from the dominant discursive languages that have governed the conservative educational narratives of recent years. For example, the language of federalism has diluted bilingual education to a rudimentary educational concoction and located it within a mainstream formula of one-size-fits-all logic. This particular language is so removed from the everyday lives of the people it was intended to serve that it disables both teachers and students simultaneously. For example, the term *Limited English Proficient* is an austere view of the potential for human development among language diverse children. In fact proficiency and limited are a contradiction in terms. Other terms like *transitional* serve to expose the nature of the inimical policies and directions the government decides to take, never considering the demographic realities of the country or the needs, self-identities, and aspirations of the various linguistic communities.

Many children who speak languages other than English are not accorded their human and civil rights in the schools when their cultures and languages are not

respected. Federal government notions regarding native languages and cultures rarely take into account the personal, social, and educational needs of non-English native language speakers. *Lau v. Nichols* (1973) was the first major piece of legislation which addressed the native language needs of the students. This landmark case was initially supported by the Office of Civil Rights (OCR), and it made a difference when the time came to implement bilingual education programs. This law became a mandate for school districts that had a given number of children identified as limited English speaking. OCR also developed a set of guidelines known as the *Lau Remedies* designed to assist school districts in the proper implementation of the programs as described in the law. Joan Rubin (1984) explained that "The remedies specified that only bilingual education was an acceptable program unless a school district could prove that another treatment was acceptable" (p. 170). These remedies were challenged in an Alaskan court which later forced OCR to rewrite the regulations. In spite of OCR's hard work and concern at that particular time, the dismantling of effective bilingual education programs proceeded when then Secretary of Education Terrell Bell rejected the newly rewritten regulations in January of 1981 thus striking down a federal initiative to provide what was deemed by bilingual education experts as a form of productive dual language instruction for language minority groups who needed it.

Several other cases (*Aspira of New York v. The New York Board of Education and Serna v. Portales in New Mexico*) ensued at the state level to support bilingual education as a way of educating language minority children who were identified as limited English proficient (LEP) according to federal government terms and definitions of children's abilities to use languages. But as only history can record, there has been great resistance to these laws. For example, there continues to exist among the general public the belief that bilingual education is for cognitively deficient language minority children; that it retards rather than enhances academic achievement; that it is unpatriotic to speak languages other than English; that it weakens rather than strengthens the social fabric of American society; and the list goes on and on. Groups such as English Only and English First have unrelentingly directed mean-spirited attacks against bilingual education and its advocates. The emergent struggle of the last twenty-five years among multilingual multicultural educators and activist politicians for a comprehensive and equitable language policy must continue. Adverse information across the prime time media about bilingual education must be given an equal opportunity to be countered by its proponents. The legitimization of bilingual education must be given its due in the popular culture domains of American society.

The authors of this special edition of *The Journal* have put their best foot forward by providing perspectives, implications, and novel notions of what imaginative educational and language policies might look like for meeting the challenging needs of the twenty-first century. The independent writings found in this volume should be considered as struggles to remap the educational and linguistic boundaries that have historically kept language minorities locked out of the mainstream settings and opportunities. These writings are attempts to relocate language minority student populations within the context of a social and educational landscape that legitimizes their unique needs and identities without apology or psychologized rationale. The mainstream educational settings will have to redefine their function. New knowledges must replace the existing and out-moded knowledge that continues to prevail and disable large numbers of children in schools across the country. All educators must be willing to invest and take up new discourses of opposition that will enable them to regain their classrooms as sites for valuing differences, extending and practicing cultural democracy, and educating students in polyopia ways that are meaningful to them and not merely reproduce knowledges that can only be referenced in and by monolingual and monocultural observations of the world.

I wish to end this introduction with a quote by Richard Shaull in his preface to Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) on the need to view the world as a reconstructible paradigm. He states:

There is no such thing as a *neutral* educational process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, *or* it becomes "the practice of freedom," the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (p. 15)

I thank all the contributors to this volume for their generosity and patience. I apologize to all of you authors who amiably waited for me. I especially thank Jay Fuhrman and Ana Garza, co-editors of the *The Journal*, and the Special Board of Editors selected to assist with this volume. I dedicate this special issue to the memories of my father *Amadeo* and my sister *Elisia*, who within the space and time of four months and in the course of developing this volume, eternally journeyed beyond the carnal dimensions of life.

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